

play the field

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play the field

by [cardans](#)

Summary

“You’ve lost, like, a third of your games so far.”

“You follow our sport?” Dream asks, pulling his shirt over his head. That obnoxious smile has returned to his face, but it looks more flattered now – genuine and only a little bit sleazy. George wants it gone.

George shifts his weight. “I follow every sport.”

“I’m touched, Georgie.”

after a season of conflicting games and locker room arguments, it's safe to say that the captains of manberg university's soccer and football teams hate each other.

Notes

disclaimer: i know nothing about sports. like, not a single thing. i researched a bit, but this fic is full of inaccuracies and it really shouldn't be taken too seriously. so with that

disclaimer out of the way, please enjoy 13.9k words of dnf hating each other, then not hating each other, then REALLY not hating each other :D

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

If there's one thing in the world George loves, it's soccer.

He's played it all his life, first as a snot-nosed toddler in a club team and now as a grown man in his final year of college, playing for Manberg University. And it's not just that he loves it, it's that he's *good*. Good enough to make captain, good enough to lead them to a win.

Speaking of wins – they won tonight. They always, always win.

There should be a few hundred people seeing it, witnessing their journey to the finals and eventually to the tournament, but instead there's fifty, scattered thin and sparse throughout the arena.

And normally there would be more, if not for the football game. If not for *every* football game.

Soccer plays on Mondays, and Football is supposed to play Fridays. *Supposed* to, but somehow, that never seems to be the case.

At first, their games overlapped by accident. There was an issue with one of the soccer games, so the soccer team had to reschedule and ended up playing at the same time as Friday Night Lights. Then half the football team got the flu and they had to work overtime, had to start playing Monday games as well as Fridays. And maybe it'd be okay, if it were temporary, if it didn't carry on like that for the rest of the season.

The Manberg Manhunters play every game on Monday now. They tackle each other and toss their stupid pigskin and steal George's crowd, every single week.

(Okay, so it's not *his* crowd, but he's the captain, and it's his senior year, and anything soccer is kind of *his*.)

And George— George knows, right? He knows that this is America, that soccer doesn't really mean anything here. It's a kid sport, something to keep the rugrats busy, but it's still his sport. It's still something he puts his all into. And it feels kind of shitty to see empty arena after empty arena, all because the idiot football players insisted on changing their schedule.

He shouldn't be mad at the players. It's not like they have any control over it. But he's mad at them anyway, because he can be. Because he wants to be. Because he doesn't even know their coach's name, so it's not like he could complain if he wanted to.

And also because the players are easy, and they're available, and they're fun to piss off.

Seriously, all those rumors about football players are true. They're airheads that get mad at the drop of a hat. They're only good at tackling and catching a ball, which are two things George can respect. He's a goalie. His whole thing revolves around his ability to spot and stop the ball. That's why he can sometimes respect the sport, even if he can't respect the dumbass players.

Well, most of them are dumbasses.

There's this one guy, this idiot that nicknamed himself 'Dream.' Like, who even *does* that? Nicknames are meant to be given to you, not decided by yourself. But whatever, George can look past that.

Anyway, this guy— he's different from the others. He's a relatively young player and an even younger captain, but he doesn't have that aloof look like most football players have, like he's taken one too many shots to the head. He looks sharp, and clever, and downright cocky. And from what George has seen, it's justified. George watches the recaps of each game (school spirit and all), and he sees the way Dream moves. It's like he's floating or something, from one end of the field to the other, straight to the end zone. On the rare occasion that they don't win, Dream still does *something* impressive in every single game, at least twice, if not three times. So yeah, he's allowed to be a little proud. And George doesn't fault him for that.

George can respect a good player in *any* sport. He can respect drive, and commitment, and hard-earned skill. But the problem is, Dream's *hot*.

Like, sizzling pans and burning suns, hot. And it's not circumstantially hot, either. *Everyone* thinks he's hot, all the time, and he fucking knows it.

"Staring at me again, George?" Dream asks from beside him, all sleazy smiles and twinkling gold eyes. He has a shirt in hand and a towel hung around his shoulders, catching each drop from his soaking hair. It's plastered flat to his head. It shouldn't be so attractive; he shouldn't look as good as he does.

"You wish," he says, and yanks his own shirt onto his body. Sharing a schedule means sharing the same locker room before, and after. Just another consequence of football's incompetence.

Dream slams both their lockers shut and leans against them, putting George at eye level with his freckled chest and broad shoulders. There's water collected in the hollows of his collarbones, and George chooses not to look.

"I don't *wish* anything. I know," he says, and looks down at George like he's giving him a once-over. "You see my touchdown tonight?"

"How could I? I was too busy winning my own game."

Dream winces, lays a dramatic hand over his chest, wet and glistening. "Ouch, low blow, Georgie," he says, pouting. "How'd you know we lost?"

He *didn't* know, but now he does. "You always lose."

(He's lying through his teeth. The Manhunters have just had a rough start to the season, but they'll bounce back. Of fucking course, they'll bounce back. They're a skilled team, and they've got an annoyingly skilled captain.)

Dream drops his hand, and George follows the movement closely. Dream's cockiness is terrible, and his face is despicable, but his hands are the worst thing about him.

His hands are *big*. Long fingers, wide palms. Clean, flushed nails, clipped close to the tip. If anything, they're goalie hands. Meant to catch and throw and stop. They're, objectively, nice fucking hands. If Dream wasn't so dead set on football, George would offer him a place on the team.

If he weren't annoying as hell. If he weren't a pain in George's ass.

“You know that’s not true,” Dream says, and now he’s looking at George with these stupidly knowing eyes, like he’s looking right through him.

“You’ve lost, like, a third of your games so far.”

“You follow our sport?” Dream asks, pulling his shirt over his head. That obnoxious smile has returned to his face, but it looks more flattered now – genuine and only a little bit sleazy. George wants it gone.

George shifts his weight. “I follow every sport.”

“I’m touched, Georgie.”

“Take it to the DM’s!” Karl shouts from three lockers over. He’s in the corner with Sapnap, tying his hoodie strings into a neat little bow.

Karl is Manberg’s striker, and Sapnap’s the center for the Manhunter team. They’re in love. George doesn’t like saying that word, because it’s college and college never really works out, but Karl and Sapnap will. They’re practically engaged. They have plans to get married after Sapnap graduates, with Quackity – the Manhunter cornerback – as their priest.

“He *wishes* we could, Karl,” Dream calls back, right eye dropping in a too-smooth wink, like it’s natural; like it’s normal; like he spends all his free time winking at soccer captains in shared locker rooms. And to make things worse, Dream is now looking at him with that cocky smile and those patronizing eyes, like he knows he’s won and he’s now waiting for his prize.

George bites his tongue and resorts to glowering, even as Dream pouts, even as he yanks the towel off his shoulders and drops it promptly on George’s head. By the time George has the towel in his hand and his hair out of his eyes, Dream is already gone, whistling all the way out the locker room.

“George, George, *Georgeeeeee.*”

“What?” he asks, finally looking up from his phone. Karl is draped over the armchair in their living room, feet hanging off one side and head hanging off the other. He looks at George upside down, all bulging forehead veins and rapidly reddening skin.

“I’m gonna invite Sapnap over, ‘kay?”

“Why can’t you just go to his place?”

Karl glares at him, but it really doesn’t have the same effect, so he goes upright and immediately groans from the blood rush. Holding his head, he says, “Cause the whole team lives there. It’s not exactly the most romantic place in the world.”

George looks around, at the *Kingdom Hearts* merch lining the shelves and cleats scattered around. Only he and Karl live here, but it looks like the whole team has come through with how much gear is on the ground. “And this is?”

“Considerably more so, yeah,” Karl says. “And I, uh, I already invited him over. Is that cool?”

George shrugs. “Whatever.”

And it *is* whatever. George knows what he said – he knows that he said all football players are good-for-nothing meatheads. And yeah, Sapnap can be a little meathead-ish, but he makes Karl

happy, and he's really not that bad once you get to know him. George has hung out with him more than once, even when Karl isn't there to force their interactions, and Sapnap isn't a bad guy. He's not like Dream. He's not cocky, obnoxious, or arrogant. And even if he were, he makes Karl happy, and that's all that really matters, isn't it?

"I could invite Dream over, too. So you won't be lonely," Karl offers, and he actually sounds serious.

"Why would I want that, Karl?"

"Well, y'know." Karl waves a hand, like that explains it all. George stares at him blankly. "You guys have that whole Lizzie Bennet and Mr. Darcy thing going on. Star-crossed-lovers, hate-your-guts sort of thing."

"You're getting your classics mixed up. And we don't have a *thing*. We're not like you and Sapnap," he says, but it still doesn't look like Karl is understanding. Slowly, George adds, "Sometimes people just hate each other."

Karl nods, like he understands, like he's *finally* getting it, then opens his mouth and ruins it all. "Yeah, but you guys don't *hate* each other."

"I'm pretty sure we do. *I'm pretty sure* we've hated each other this whole time."

"Dream doesn't *hate* you. He doesn't hate anyone. He's, like, the nicest guy ever," Karl says, which is totally biased because Dream's *supposed* to be nice to him. Sapnap is to Dream like Karl is to George. Sapnap's his best friend, and he'd probably do anything to see him happy, even if it means putting up with his soccer-playing boyfriend.

"Well, he's not nice to me."

"That's just 'cause he likes you."

George laughs, sharp and humorless. "Oh shut up, Karl. Just because you got your Romeo and Juliet doesn't mean I get it, too."

"It's not Romeo and Juliet. Sappy and I never hated each other. We're too smart for that."

"*Sappy*? God, what kind of name is Sapnap, anyway?"

Karl looks offended. "I think it's cute."

"No, you don't," George says, unlocking his phone. "Is pizza for dinner okay?"

"Mhm. Two cheese, a pepperoni, and a hawaiian."

His finger freezes on the screen. "Dream is *not* coming over," he says. Then, "He likes fucking *hawaiian*?"

"It's a minor character flaw."

"It's a major one," George corrects. "I'm only ordering three. Do *not* invite him."

"Fine, fine. But just— trade out one of those cheeses for a hawaiian, okay? I'm kinda into it."

George's mouth goes wide. "He's corrupted you. What's next? Are you going to start throwing around a football and failing all your classes?"

“Just—order the honking pizza.”

Monday comes.

They play their soccer game. They win.

No one fucking sees it.

Everyone is too busy watching football fumble the ball and lose the game. It’s a one-off loss. George talks a lot of shit, but the Manhunters are good. Like, *really* good. And they lost the game, which, like, whatever. It’s fine, it happens. And George shouldn’t be mad, but he is. Their loss is fucking embarrassing, to them and Manberg University, and especially to George and their team. Because they’re in the field, working their asses off every day, winning every single game, and no one is paying any attention.

He knows he shouldn’t care. He got into soccer because he loves the sport, not because he loves the attention. But still. It fucking sucks to look out and see no one cheering, no one watching. And he knows it affects the team, too. Tommy complains about it all the time, and Tubbo wears every emotion plainly on his face. Boomer never voices his disappointment, doesn’t even show it, but George has heard him on the phone after games. He’s heard him talking to his football-playing brother, Punz. Hears him telling Punz how they won, how they’re *still* undefeated. And Punz always congratulates him, then gives the phone to their parents so Boomer can give them the news himself. Because they’re at *Punz’s* game, not Boomer’s, and that’s just the way things are.

But that’s not the way things *need* to be.

George is the captain. The team, their happiness – it’s his responsibility. It *shouldn’t* be his responsibility because he’s only the captain, not the coach, but Wilbur doesn’t like drama. He wants them to stick it out until next season. *It’s just a few months*, he said. And George tried. He *tried* to stick it out. But Tommy is complaining, Tubbo is disappointed, and Boomer smiles less and less after every win. George can’t just sit there and watch his team suffer any longer. It’s not even an option.

So he does some digging. He goes to the sports website and clicks through links until he finds the coach.

(He also clicks through the players. *Captain Clay Bloque, 21*. How the hell did *Clay* become *Dream*? That doesn’t even make sense.)

The coach is a young man, last name Foolish. He graduated recently with a degree in Sports Management, and when he isn’t coaching, he can be found in the Student Support Office, doing whatever the hell SSO does.

George wasn’t going to approach him in person. He was planning on calling him, or emailing to see if they could work out the schedules. But he lives so close to campus, and it’s still working hours, and he’s confident that he can pressure Foolish into switching the games around if he talks to him in person.

So he does that. He saunters into SSO, confident, and asks for Foolish.

And Foolish, well, he’s the nicest guy George has ever fucking met. He’s all chiseled bones and swooping hair, real handsome, and he laughs as pretty as he looks.

“My god, I didn’t even *realize!* I’ll get that fixed up quick, no biggie. Thanks for bringing this up

to me,” he says, and George can’t believe it was this *easy*. All he can do is nod, dumbfounded, as Foolish claps him on the back and says, “Let me know if you need anything else, yeah?”

His kindness *totally* makes the tongue lashing he gets from Dream worth it.

(Not that it wouldn’t be worth it anyway. His favorite Dream is an angry one, when he’s all sharp worded and mean-tongued and anything other than infuriatingly cocky. It’s extra reassurance for George, evidence that shows Dream is still *human*; that shows George gets under his skin, the same way Dream does to him.)

It happens in the locker room after practice when both teams are crowded in, fresh and clean. George is in the process of pulling jeans on when Dream comes up to him, angry and seething, practically foaming at the mouth. He’s dropped his stupid nice guy, kill-them-with-relentless-flirting act. Dream talks a big game, always acts like he’s so much better than George with his stupid words and flirty jabs, but George knows the truth. He knows Dream is mean and hateful on the inside, just like George. They wouldn’t be such a perfect match otherwise.

“What did you do?” Dream asks, and George knows, of course he fucking knows, but he plays dumb anyway.

“What?” he asks. Calm. Level. Collected. Everything Dream isn’t.

“You got our games moved. The fuck is that about?”

George tries to hide his smile, and fails. “Oh,” he says slowly, pulling his jeans up. “That. Yeah, sorry.”

“You’re *sorry*? I’ve been talking shit to the Cavaliers all week in prep for Monday’s game, and you’re *sorry*?” Dream’s got his jaw clenched tight, face red from the effort and anger. George wants to take a picture of it, wants to revel in Dream’s frustration for as long as he can. But he also wants to see Dream bend, and crack, and break.

“What? Is that not good enough?” George asks, innocent.

Dream scoffs as he walks away, and everything in George rejoices.

Football plays Friday.

George makes a point not to go, but he *does* obsessively follow every update that Karl tweets out. Most are about Sapnap, either congratulating him for breathing or begging Foolish to put him back on the field. There are some tweets about Dream, too, because he’s the quarterback and also because, no matter how much it hurts George to admit, Dream *does* know how to play. He’s a beast on the field, bulldozes through linemen like they’re nothing. He could go pro, easy. He could be so much more than Manberg’s shining star.

It’s a good thing he’s not pro, though, because it’s him that secures the win.

There were fifteen seconds left on the clock and, thanks to Punz, the Manhunters were up a point. But a Cavalier had the ball, and he moved like the fucking wind. He sidestepped Callahan, and dodged Sam, and hurdled through Quackity, right to the twenty-yard line. Then Dream came out of nowhere, a fucking god dressed in neon socks, and tackled him right before the endzone.

The Manhunters beat the Cavaliers. Barely, fucking barely, but they beat the Cavaliers.

It was a hard game, especially after last week's loss, and they—

“—deserve a party, George,” Karl says as he tugs George through the door of the Manhunter team house.

“We win every week. You don't see *us* throwing parties,” George grumbles. The music is loud in his ears, and the LED lights are bright in his eyes, and he's starting to regret coming in the first place. He's only here because Karl said he'd buy him some new gloves, and George's are worn to the pads, and he *really* needs those gloves.

“That's ‘cause we're awesome, and— Look! Boomer's here!” Karl says, promptly pushing George in his direction. When George turns, all he sees is Karl's fleeing back, headed for a glowing white bandana in the center of the room.

George doesn't end up going to Boomer, mostly because Boomer is underage with a drink in his hand, but also because Big Brother Punz is already there, teaching him how to shotgun it. Instead, George cuts through the crowd, knocking past burning shoulders and sticky skin as he looks for the kitchen. He's been in the team house a few times now, and it's never been a pleasant experience. There's always trash on the ground. Empty bottles on the shelves. Clothes scattered everywhere.

(He's only ever been here during parties, but he prefers to believe that the Manhunters *always* live in a pigsty, to match their pigskin.)

He finds the kitchen after a few wrong turns. Callahan is sat on the counter, listening as Sam rambles on and on about the game, words slurred and loose.

“—shoulda fuckin' carded him, man,” Sam says, and George tunes him out. He digs around the cooler for a bit, sifts through White Claws and Truly's and the occasional Natty Light before settling on a Smirnoff Ice. He looks around for a bottle opener and comes up empty, because apparently everyone in this house is a fucking heathen that uses their teeth to pop caps off.

(It's not just an assumption. He's seen Sapnap do it before, and almost break his teeth in the process. Karl praised him anyway, because love makes you congratulate stupid people for stupid things.)

He turns to the fridge door, starts running his hands all up and down it. The LED lights are scattered through the living room, but some of the light still finds its way into the kitchen, painting his hands and the silver fridge door in swaths of yellows and blues.

“Did you see the game?”

George turns so fast, his neck pops.

Dream stands beside him, not in clunky football gear but in plain, simple clothes, the type George would expect to see at a department store. George has seen him dressed down before, but never like this. Not without a duffle bag around his shoulder, or a football in his hands. When he's like this, he almost looks... normal. More boy-next-door than captain-quarterback-asshole.

To summarize: it's weird to see Dream in this way. So fucking weird.

So George focuses on things that haven't changed instead of noticing all the things that have. Dream's blond hair, soft and messy; his scattered freckles, prominent; his stupid eyes, darker in the changing light, matching his yellow hoodie perfectly.

It's an ugly yellow hoodie. Really, super ugly. Like, supremely ugly.

That's why George is staring. Because it's ugly, and terrible, and not at all perfectly fitted.

"George?"

"Not in person," he finally answers.

"We did pretty well, considering you fucked our whole schedule over."

George smiles, and forgets about his bottle dilemma entirely. "You did pretty well, *period*. You should be thanking me for getting your game switched. Your win is because of *me* and the extra three days between games."

Dream rolls his eyes, real dramatic. "I'm not thanking you for shit."

"Whatever. You made a goal, right?"

"A touchdown," Dream corrects seamlessly. "And I saved the game."

"*Saved the game,*" George echoes in his worst American accent, soft in the *t* and harsh in the *g*. "I doubt it."

"I'll send you the video."

"You'd need my number to do that."

"I'll hunt down your email," Dream says, and for that George has no argument. There's a moment of silence before Dream asks, "You need some help with your bottle? I saw you looking for an opener."

George doesn't want to admit that Dream's right, but he also doesn't want to be here while sober, so he shoves the bottle in Dream's direction without saying a word. Dream lets out a laugh, this low little chuckle, and George goes warm all over.

(The warmth is hate, or something.)

Dream sets the can he's holding aside. George looks at it instead of him. It's a normal 16oz can, but it's got this little beer jacket on it, embroidered with a smiley face. Who brings a *beer jacket* to a party?

Dream takes the Smirnoff and laughs that stupid laugh again. "George, it's a *twist-off*," he says, opening the bottle. Vapor curls in the air, around the neck of the bottle and up to Dream's smiling mouth. White teeth flash as he offers it back to George.

George takes it and promptly sets it aside. He picks up Dream's can, turns it around in his hands until he's got the smiley face crushed beneath his thumb. "What's with this?"

Dream shrugs, and doesn't reach for the can. "It's a koozie. I got a pack of ten off Amazon. You can have one if you want."

"I don't *want*," George says. He slides the *koozie* off and sees pretty silver letters staring back at him. It's a La Croix can. Passionfruit.

He doesn't ask, because he shouldn't. Because it's none of his damn business what Dream drinks. Because it's not his place to wonder why Dream is the only sober person at a party hosted in *his*

house.

George shoves the can back into Dream's hands, grabs a Cran-Raspberry from the cooler, and says, "This one is better."

"Thanks." Dream cracks the new can open. He drinks from it right then and there, makes a whole show of swallowing and smacking his lips. "It's fine, I guess."

George scowls and drinks his Smirnoff. "You *guess*?"

"Mhm," Dream hums, and leaves it at that. "You coming to our next game?"

"Why would I do that?"

Dream shrugs. "You said you follow every sport."

"I do."

"Then follow mine."

George takes a long drink from his bottle. The Smirnoff goes down too easily.

"I'll think about it," he finally says, and tries to ignore the way Dream smiles at him.

For a Sunday night, the hallway to the locker room is oddly empty.

Sunday is the night for soccer *and* football's practice, because of fucking course it is. Unless it's not. Unless Foolish actually switched the practices around, too. But even then, George expects there to be more people. Manberg players, at least.

He enters the locker room, and he sees nothing.

There are no steaming showers or thumping feet. No yelling from Quackity or bickering between Sapnap and Punz. There's only silence, and—

"Woah."

George whips towards the exit, and comes face to face with a tan throat. Swallowing, he looks up and sees Dream, awestruck, eyes locked on the empty locker room. George takes a step back, setting his bag down on the bench.

"It's weird, right?" George asks, unzipping his duffle.

"Totally," Dream says. He sets his things down next to George's, even though there's an entire other half of the locker room and three open benches, just a few feet away.

"Do you have to be so close to me all the time?" It comes out a hiss.

Dream looks at him. Not in anger, but in palm-sweating, heart-speeding amusement. There's this little smirk on his face, like he knows exactly what he's doing. "Don't flatter yourself, Georgie. You know my locker is right here," he says, pounding a fist on the navy locker right beside George's. Dream's locker is #69, because of fucking course it is.

(Not that George can really talk. He only took #70 because he was bitter about not getting #69. If he'd known what an asshole his locker neighbor would be, he would've chosen literally anything

else.)

“Yeah, yeah,” George grumbles, stepping into his cleats. “Are you sure you still have practice today? Foolish switched your games. Maybe he switched your practice, too.”

“He would’ve talked to me about it,” Dream says, confident. But he goes quiet for too long, face all pensive, like he’s suddenly unsure. He has his compression pants pulled halfway up his legs when he grabs his phone, starts typing on it like mad. Dial tone fills the empty room, then:

“*What?*” Sapnap asks upon answering. “*You’re on speaker, by the way.*”

Dream’s brows furrow. “I’m on— Wait, where are you?”

“*I’m at Karl’s. Where else would I be?*”

George grabs Dream’s hand, pulling the phone closer to him. Dream’s skin is hot and searing. George is sure that when he lets go, he’ll have third-degree burns where his fingerprints used to be. “Why are you at my house, Sapnap?”

There’s shuffling on the end of the line, and a little yelp from Sapnap.

“*GEORGE!*” Karl screams into the phone.

“Why is Sapnap with you? Why aren’t you at practice?” George demands.

Dream yanks the phone away from George and closer to himself. “Don’t answer that. Sapnap, why aren’t *you* at practice?”

They both speak at once.

“*I’m at home ‘cause there’s no practice.*” Karl.

“*It was cancelled, you fucking idiot.*” Sapnap.

“Practice was *what?*” George asks, and glares at Dream when he echoes the words a few seconds after.

“*Cancelled,*” Sapnap repeats. “*There was an emergency meeting.*”

Dream breathes out through clenched teeth. “And no one thought to tell me?”

“*Foolish emailed.*”

“*And I thought you knew, George.*”

George pinches the bridge of his nose. “You thoug—”

Dream ends the call.

George stares at Dream. Really, truly stares. Then, “What the fuck did you do that for?”

“We found out what we needed to know,” Dream reasons, and he’s back to his stupid, patronizing self. He shoves the compression pants down his calves as George leans down to tie his cleats. “What— what are you doing?”

George finishes one shoe and starts on the other. “What does it look like? I’m getting ready to

practice.”

“But practice is cancelled.”

“I still need to practice. I have a game tomorrow,” he says, standing upright. Dream’s got this confused look on his face, and George begins to think maybe he *isn’t* an exception to the jock stereotype.

“What do you even need to practice for? It’s just kicking a ball around. It’s not that difficult.”

“Is that what you think soccer is? Just kicking a ball around?”

Dream nods. “I mean, yeah. You do it, so it can’t be *that* hard.”

George hears the jab, and the challenge, and he knows he shouldn’t give in. But George is greedy. He always, always needs to win. In soccer, and school, and especially when it comes to Dream.

The words just kind of come out. “Give it a try, then. Show me how *easy* it is.”

It was a taunt. It was supposed to be a taunt. But now Dream is smiling at him with misplaced confidence, all smug and shiny-eyed. He looks at George, shoves his compression pants in his bag, and says, “Okay.”

So George pulls on his gloves, grabs a ball from the closet, and leads Dream to the soccer fields. And it’s not like he has a choice, y’know? He made the offer, and Dream fucking took him up on it, like an idiot. Would he have made the offer if he knew Dream was going to accept it? No. Of course not. Why would he ever subject himself to spending time with Dream?

But what’s done is done, and it’ll be a good ego boost, anyway.

And, after nearly an hour of Dream trying to make a goal and failing, George finds out that he was right. It *is* a good ego boost. Because Dream— well, he *sucks*. Like so, so bad.

“You can’t run with the ball!” George yells, laughter breaking his words into incomprehensible pieces.

“What was that?” Dream asks from across the field. He’s holding the ball like it’s his kid as he runs towards George. “Can’t hear you, Georgie! I’m too busy scor—”

George barrels into Dream. It’s a full-on football tackle, the type of shit that’ll get him banned from the league for life. But Dream’s a football guy, and George has seen him take worse hits before.

They fall to the turf, and Dream doesn’t cry or grumble or groan. He just breaks George’s fall and lets George roll off him after. His chest rises and falls with rapid breaths, half from running and half from the tea-kettle laughs, erupting from his lips like he can’t keep them in. George must be extra tired or something, because Dream’s stupid laugh is actually kind of nice. In, like, a cute sort of way.

George jumps to his feet and picks up the soccer ball Dream had released upon falling. “You can’t run with the ball,” he says again, nudging the tip of his cleat into Dream’s ribs as he offers out a hand.

Dream looks up at him, still gently wheezing. “I know that now.”

“Bullshit. You always knew that.”

Dream grins and lets himself get hauled up. “Whatever. Let’s go again. I’ll score this time.”

“You said that the last two dozen times.”

“Okay, but I *really* mean it this time.”

As George walks towards the center of the field, he finds himself shaking his head in amusement. Which, like, so fucking weird, right? Dream’s here, and he’s laughing. Dream’s speaking, and George is *still* laughing. George doesn’t know if they’ve ever had an interaction that didn’t go sour at one point or another, but apparently they’re doing that now. Dream is here, and he’s being an idiot, and George is kind of okay with it.

George sets the ball on the dividing line. “Is soccer still as easy as you thought?”

“You know I’m not gonna answer that,” Dream says, taking his place behind the ball. George runs back to the goal. They start again, and it seems like Dream is really trying this time.

He does this whole thing with his face when he’s focused, starts clenching his jaw and flexing his fingers, like he’s giving the energy one last chance to get out before he uses it. George has seen him do it in the past, before impossible touchdowns and game-saving tackles. It usually works. He usually wins.

But this isn’t football, and Dream doesn’t win.

George catches the ball when he goes to score, like he always does. It’s easy, because Dream’s made for football. His feet are made for sprinting yards and slamming shins, not kicking goals and doing trickshots. He’s too rough, too clunky.

He gapes after George catches the ball, eyes wide as saucers. “*How?* That was, like, the perfect shot!”

George smiles and tosses the ball from one hand to the other. “You’re just not good,” he says, because there really is no other way to put it.

“I’d like to see you try and learn a new sport in a day.” Dream steals the ball right out of the air. He tosses it up one time, and another, before his hands go still and his face goes light as a bulb. “*I’d like to see you try and learn a new sport.* Play football with me.”

“No,” George says immediately. Then, after some thought, he says it again. “No.”

George knows what he’s good at. He’s good at soccer, and coding, and making pancakes in the middle of the night. He’s not good at group assignments, or getting up early, or football.

Dream’s voice goes whiny. “Why not?”

“Because I know my limits. I don’t know how to play football, and I’m not gonna embarrass myself trying.”

“Did I not just embarrass myself for your entertainment? C’mon, George, just give it a shot.” Dream’s practically begging now, and it’d be pitiful if it weren’t so funny.

“I’m not doing it,” he repeats.

“Then let me teach you.”

George freezes. “*Teach me?*” he asks slowly. Dream’s face goes brighter than the sun, and something in George’s chest kicks into gear.

“I’ll teach you how to throw the ball and stuff. And how to tackle *properly*,” Dream says with a pointed glare, but it doesn’t look the least bit mean.

George doesn’t plan on agreeing, but apparently the offer of tackling Dream is a real incentive for him, because suddenly he’s nodding. “Yeah,” he says. “Okay.”

“Yeah?” Dream asks, and he looks so, so happy. Even if George wanted to, he doesn’t think he could say no.

(He doesn’t *want* to say no. Really, he doesn’t. He wants to stay here, and he wants to learn how to play football. No— he wants *Dream* to teach him how to play football. For some reason, the distinction matters.)

“Yeah. Go get your ball.”

Dream runs off and when he comes back, he’s got a well-loved football in hand. He first teaches George how to hold the ball, shows him how to stick his fingers between the white lacing and where to put his thumb. There’s a sort of excitement in his voice, like he’s passionate about what he’s doing. Like he loves teaching, and football, and teaching *George* about football.

They stay there for another two hours. Dream teaches him how to throw, catch, and pass. And how to tackle, of course, but it’s not like how George imagined it would be. It’s not him just attacking Dream to try and piss him off, or catching him off guard. It’s calm, and slow, and full of shared laughter.

Dream critiques him a lot. Gives him gentle suggestions and little tips here and there, and normally that would piss George off. Normally *anything* from Dream would piss him off. But not right now, not when they’re passing a football back and forth and chatting about the best plays in NFL history.

The time passes too quickly. The sun goes down, the air turns cold, and as he watches Dream leave the locker room for the night, George almost feels like they’re friends.

Manberg wins on Monday.

It was three to nothing. The other team tried to score, but George blocked every shot, barely breaking a sweat. It was an easy win, but it still feels good when the team hoists him up on their shoulders, carries him around like he’s some king.

The world looks different from high up. He can see so much: a waving flag outside; a spilled blue ICEE by the concession stand; a neon yellow hoodie, walking out the exit.

George doesn’t know what brings him to Friday’s game.

Maybe it’s the free tickets, or his desire to see them lose in person, or maybe it’s just because he and Dream are friends.

Kinda.

Sorta.

More of aggressive acquaintances.

When he told Dream he'd think about it at the party, he'd already had his mind made up. He wasn't gonna go to the Manhunters game, not this one or any others in the future. He's a soccer player, and the Manhunters are the reason why no one came to their games. It's, like, betrayal or something.

But George has all this football knowledge now, and it'd be a waste not to put it to use.

And Karl's also been begging him to go to a game, claims they need to support their school. As the game progressed, it became abundantly clear that Karl doesn't care about the school. He just cares about Sapnap, who he's currently screaming his head off for, even though the third period has just ended and there's no one to hear his praise but George and his poor ears. But Karl's having fun, and George's hearing is shit anyway.

"So they're tied now, but Punz'll fix it. He's good at this sort of thing," Karl explains between half-caught breaths. "They're all good, but Punz is *really* good. Sap says he works best under pressure. He's a wide receiver, so he—"

"I know what a wide receiver is, Karl."

Karl's forehead scrunches up, real confused. "You do? How?"

George shrugs and shoves popcorn into his mouth. Dream explained all of the positions to him when they practiced together, and when he ran out of positions, he went and explained practically everything else. George is an encyclopedia of football knowledge now. He knows the Superbowl winners from the last two decades, and game-related controversies, and the names of everyone on the Florida Gators. Dream said he wasn't a fan, then proceeded to list off every player and their blood types.

(George is kidding, of course, but he wouldn't be surprised if Dream actually had.)

When you know how the game works, football is, surprisingly, not boring. It's sort of fun, to watch their tackles and throws and know how hard they're trying, to see the effort that they're putting in. Now that George has actually tackled *and* been tackled himself, he can be impressed when he sees a player brush off an attack like it's nothing.

Most players are pretty good about that – getting up after they've been brought down. Sapnap's got particularly thick skin, and Quackity always bounces back up seconds after he's fallen. The only people that waver are members of the opposing team, the Thorns. They always seem to hesitate for a second or two, always seem to lag behind after a particularly hard tackle.

It's usually Dream's fault when it happens. He's not really defense, but he seems to barrel into anyone he can, just completely knocks them off balance. It's not the training tackles he was using with George. No – these tackles are mean and they are ruthless and they are so fucking *hot*.

Just kinda. Just a little bit.

"Look, they're starting!" Karl says, shaking his arm, like George can't hear the damn buzzer himself.

The two teams take their places on the field. Dream's the quarterback, so he's right behind Sapnap, waiting for the ball.

Dream watches the Thorns.

George watches him.

He calls hut, and Sapnap snaps the ball back to him. Dream shoots off, like fucking lightning. Through the Thorns' line and out the other side, a neon-footed bolt bursting through brown-clad Thorns. He runs, and he runs, and he throws.

Punz catches, then drops the ball.

He *drops* the ball.

George's breath catches in his throat, and there's this distinct pounding in his ears, one that he normally only hears during games of his own. But maybe this is his game, too. It's his school, his peers. His kinda-sorta friend.

Punz catches it before it hits the ground, and there are Thorns on his tail, and by his side, and he's not looking too good. George grabs Karl's open hand and holds on tight, perched on the edge of his seat.

It's tied. The game is tied. They just need to hold out and--

A Thorn wrestles the ball out of Punz's hands. The player throws this perfect, perfect arc, and it all happens so fast. A Thorn on the other side catches it and passes to someone on the thirty-yard line, who then takes it and throws, all the way through the goal.

The Thorns take their kick. The Manhunters crowd around them, all jumping and reaching for the football as it flies through the air above their heads. Callahan gets the closest, but not close enough. The ball goes through the goal, and the three points awarded to the Thorns feel like real thorns in George's side.

"They almost had it," Karl whispers. "They almost had it."

There's five minutes left, and they're three points down.

The Manhunters played a good game. It's an honorable loss. They gave it their all, and they tried their best, and sometimes you just fucking lose. It sucks, but it happens.

The clock winds down as the two teams join at the center line again. Sapnap is still in the front and Dream is still behind him, waiting for the ball. Dream yells hut, and Sapnap snaps the ball left instead of behind, to Sam instead of Dream.

Sam runs a bit before throwing. He's tackled after he throws, but that doesn't matter, because the ball is already in the air, soaring over shining helmets and clustered bodies. The ball deflects off a Thorns player, and the impact keeps it going for a few more yards, right into a patch of empty field.

It shouldn't work, but it will. Because that's the play. That's the *play*.

George remembers sitting on the soccer field with his legs crossed in front of him. There was a football in his hands and a soccer ball in Dream's, who'd been trying to spin it on his index finger with no success.

Dream was rambling about legendary games, and somehow a 1972 game between the Pittsburgh Steelers and the Oakland Raiders was brought up. The Steelers were behind, but they won with some amazing fucking play.

The Immaculate Reception, Dream had called it.

George couldn't figure out how it worked when Dream was talking about it. But he gets it now, because he *sees* it.

He sees Dream jumping through the air and catching the ball, and he sees him run and dash, all the way to the end zone. There's seconds left, ticking fast, but Dream makes it. He makes it, and the buzzer sounds, and the Manhunters win the game. They win the fucking game.

There's screaming in George's ears. It's only when his throat starts to burn that he realizes it's *him*. Karl is screaming too, of course, but his voice is already so faded, and George is the one that's really shining through.

"We gotta— we gotta—" Karl says, but he always starts screaming again before he can finish. George knows what he's trying to say.

They rush down the stairs together and hop over the barrier and onto the field, even as the security guards shout at them to stop. They go and they run, into the thick of the players and the team and the *glory*.

There's a lot of elbow dodging involved as he pushes his way to the middle, but he's a soccer player, and he's built for quick, agile movements. He sees Sapnap first, sweat soaked and smiling, and he doesn't see Dream. But he feels him – feels a padded body crash into him, feels all his bones shake then settle. He turns around and Dream's there, dressed in blue polyester and those ugly neon socks. He's there. Red-faced, gold-eyed. He lifts George up, spinning him around the sidelines like they're friends, like this is normal, like this is okay.

And fuck, maybe it *is* okay.

It's not so bad, y'know? Dream is this warm, solid body against him, and he's leaking energy like he's made of it. George feels sorta drunk on it as Dream holds him close and spins him around, whooping the entire time. It's almost like a soccer win, like he's just caught the game-deciding ball and the buzzer is ringing, and his teammates are screaming, and he's *literally* holding victory in his hands.

The world starts to slow, and the high fades. It's no longer a scream in his ears but a hum in his chest. It's light. Floaty. Unbelievably easy.

"You won," George finally says, voice hoarse from his own shouts, both in the stands and on the field, in his seat and in Dream's ear.

They part, but barely. George still has his hands fisted in Dream's jersey, and Dream's still kind of touching his sides. It should be revolting, but it isn't. George should feel disgusted, but he doesn't.

"Thanks to you." Dream's smile is so big, and he looks so shocked and proud and *happy*, and George kind of wants to live in this moment forever. "You came."

"Just wanted to see you lose for myself," he says, but he's smiling too big for it to sound even a little bit malicious, so he drops the act and goes straight to the complimenting. "You *killed* it, Dream."

Dream laughs and ducks his head, like he's bashful. "Guess you're my good luck charm," he says. He's got that stupid smile on his face, the one he always has when he's talking to George. George has never doubted its intent before – it's always been to push his buttons, to piss him off, because Dream knows he can't stand being talked down to – but now he *is* kind of doubting it, because his

words and that smile don't feel like a joke; don't feel like he's kidding.

"I guess I am," George replies, and it's like he's suddenly aware of fucking *everything*. They're willingly talking. They're getting along. They're *touching*.

It's too much for enemies.

It's too much for friends.

But Karl is on Sapnap's shoulders, and Punz is hugging Callahan, and it's really not a big deal at all.

As time passes, George's weeks stop becoming defined by days and start being defined by events.

There's Practice Sunday, and Manberg Soccer Monday. Manhunter Friday.

He only knows Wednesday because it's when he and Dream have a private practice and then get Thai right after.

(*"So fucking good," Dream says, legs spread out on the turf in front of him.*

George takes another bite of his pad kee mao. "It is," he replies, setting down his fork.

Dream steals it the second it's released, stabbing through chicken and noodles. Then, with a full mouth, he says, "We should make this a thing."

"Yes," George says immediately. "A hundred percent, yes."

George could blame his decision on being fuzzy, or full, or just plain exhausted. But he's not gonna do that because then he'd be lying, and he doesn't wanna lie. He said yes because he wanted to. Because he likes spending time with Dream, and he wants it to be a thing, too.)

What used to be Party Saturday is now just a day for Dream and him to do whatever the fuck they want.

(*"There's supposed to be a party tomorrow," George says before a football game. He's in the front row, leaning over the railing and looking down at Dream as he prepares.*

"Eh," Dream rolls out his calf, "I don't really wanna go."

"You don't wanna see me?" he asks in mock offense.

Dream rolls his eyes, and a dimple appears when he smiles. "I never said that. 's just not really my scene, y'know?"

It should, by all means, be Dream's scene. He's hot, and he's popular, and he'd be the center of attention so long as he shows up. But George understands. He knows now that there's more to Dream than what meets the eye, knows that there's more to him than touchdowns and cocky smiles.

"You don't drink during football season, do you?" George asks. They've met at parties before and Dream's sipped La Croix's every time, even as George chugs hard seltzers and spiked lemonades.

Dream switches to his other leg. "I don't drink at all. Never have, never will."

George hums, and watches as Dream moves the roller back and forth. "Guess we can catch a

movie, then. Grab some food after. There's a French place downtown that's open late. They've got the best crepes."

"*You had me at movie.*"

"*It's a date, then.*"

"*Can't wait.*")

Thursday used to be his designated studying day but as the tournament comes closer and closer, he's had to divide the day in two. Thursday mornings now serve as an extra practice day for Manberg Soccer. And it sucks, because they're still worn out from Monday's game and it's not like they *need* the practice, but George makes them practice anyway. They're undefeated, but that doesn't mean anything if they lose the tournament. They could beat every team in the world and lose the fucking tournament, and all those wins would've been for nothing.

(George knows he's jumping the gun, knows that they should be training with finals in mind and not the tournament, but he can't help it. The tournament is the end goal, always.)

Thursday nights are now his time to revise, since he's still a student in college and grades are still a thing. He's a comp-sci major, and that degree isn't gonna get itself. He loves it almost as much as soccer, if not more so. It's his *plan* plan. Yeah, soccer is his life, but he can't pursue it in America. It's just not realistic. After graduation, he's done. And it's okay. He's made his peace with it, knows that his future is written in Python and JavaScript.

It's not like that for Dream.

They both know that. They talk about it all the time, beneath starry skies and the setting sun.

Dream's going to go pro after college. He's gotten offers before, so many fucking offers, but he sticks around because the team needs him, and he needs the team, and he's just not ready to let them go.

And George gets it. It's why he feels guilty when he gives himself too much alone time, because he knows that this is his last year and every minute he gives to himself is one that he isn't giving to the team. It's also why he gets sad when he isolates himself too much. He knows he can't get this time back yet he still spends it alone, because sometimes being alone is easier than seeking people out.

He doesn't always want to be alone.

He texts Dream (because that's a thing now), asks *are you free or have you somehow manipulated people into hanging out with you?*

It's Tuesday, and normally they don't talk on Tuesdays. It's smack dab between Monday's game and Wednesday's practice, and they have no reason to talk. But George texts him anyway, because he's bored, and Karl is gone, and it's all so quiet.

Dream's answer comes a minute later.

I'm just studying, he says. But I wanna manipulate you. Come hang out with me.

George doesn't need much more of an invitation than that.

Callahan nods at him when he enters the team house without knocking, then goes back to playing

some first-person shooter game with Punz, who is swearing like a sailor as Callahan kills him over and over. Punz only pauses in his expletives to tell George that Dream's room is, "Third on the left!" before he goes back to trying to escape Callahan.

George knew where Dream's room was in, like, theory. He knew that it was by Sapnap's, which was by the bathroom with a hole for a handle, which was by the staircase. But he's never been here, not really. He doesn't go to parties anymore, so he has no reason to be in the team house. When he *did* go to parties he and Dream usually just hung out in the backyard, away from the party and the people and the noise.

It's not a big deal though. It's just a room. George isn't scared.

He passes the bathroom with the hole-handle and Sapnap's room. He stops in front of Dream's door, raises his fist to knock, and never makes contact.

He shouldn't be scared. It's a fucking room in a house, not The Louvre. It's just—

He's never been here before.

To Dream's room, he means. *In* Dream's room. And Dream's never been in his, either, because they don't— they don't hang out. They practice together, and they split dinner bills, and sometimes they go to the cinema, but that's not really hanging out. Not like how this is. This is close. It's personal. Intimate, in a way. It's Dream's space, and George doesn't think they know each other well enough for that.

He knows Dream on the field (confident), and in the locker room (cocky), and over shared plates of takeout (teasing). But he doesn't know Dream in a house, in his bed. He doesn't know Dream when the ball is in his court, in his domain.

"He's waiting for you," Sam tells him as he passes. He steps around George on his way to the bathroom, gone as quick as he came.

Dream's waiting for him.

George doesn't even knock. He just opens the door.

The first thing he sees is neon green, scattered all over the place, little trinkets here and there. The same color as Dream's football socks, his hoodie, his everything.

(“*What's the deal with all the yellow?*”

Dream looks at him dumbly, hand freezing above the pizza box between them. “What yellow?”

“*It's, like, your color,*” he says as he picks the pineapple off his slice.

“*My green?*”

George shakes his head, popping the wedge of fruit into his mouth. “No, not green. That's definitely yellow. Like, pineapple yellow. Piss yellow.”

“*It's– it's green, George,*” Dream says, sounding like a plea.

“*No, I don't think so.*”)

The second thing he sees is Dream.

He's sitting at a tiny desk with one earbud in his ear, hunched over a bunch of papers. They're full of double-spaced Times New Roman, and George recalls an earlier conversation about their majors. Dream's is English and he hates it, but he's in too deep to drop it.

Not that it matters. Future NFL player, and all.

"Hey," George says from the doorway.

Dream turns in his chair, yanks his earbuds fully out of his ear. They dangle from the collar of his hoodie, two white cords against that obnoxious yellow-green. "Hi," Dream greets, and he looks nervous, somehow. Like the way he does before each game when it's just him, the team he needs to beat, and the crowd he doesn't want to disappoint.

(The Manhunters have been on a winning streak since changing their schedule. They've won each game, and now Dream's nervous expression is a cause of amusement rather than anxiety. George usually laughs whenever he sees it, always says that Dream's an idiot for being so nervous. He's not laughing now.)

"So this is you," he says, stepping in. He wants to look around and explore the space, because it's new and unfamiliar and it's *Dream's*. It feels like Dream; feels like cloudy skies and forgotten parties and turf beneath his palms. But no matter how familiar it feels, it's still sort of scary, so George slips off his shoes, takes a seat on the bed, and admires from a distance.

(He remembers looking up football results after each game. Watching the highlight reels. Finding player #1 in any clip, no matter how short and fuzzy. Admiring, from a distance.)

"This is me," Dream confirms. "I'm just finishing up this essay. I think my laptop is over there somewhere. You can watch something if you want." He turns back to his papers, but only for a moment. He swivels back around toward George, and he's still sort of smiling, soft and private in a way George doesn't understand.

"What?" George asks.

Dream just shakes his head. "It's nothing. There's some drinks in that mini-fridge, by the way."

George looks left, then right, then left again. "Oh, you mean the one you're using as a bedside table?"

"I get thirsty," Dream says, innocent.

"Sure you do." George opens the mini-fridge. There's an assortment of La Croix cans in there, tons of different shades. There's a lot of Passionfruit and Lime. Like, an embarrassing amount, considering they're subpar flavors. But George decides not to comment on it because wedged in the top right corner are six cans of Cran-Raspberry, and George can't fault Dream for Cran-Raspberry. He grabs one, fingers wrapping around warm, flimsy aluminum. "I think your fridge is broken."

"You broke something of mine already? Are you expecting a congratulation?" Dream asks, and he's well and truly focused on his work again, making little marks with his bright red pen. He doesn't even turn to face George. He keeps writing and, as an afterthought, says, "Congratulations."

(George thinks of teeth and bottles and booze. He doesn't know why.)

"I didn't break anything," he says quickly. Even after all this time, his first instinct is *still* to be on

the defensive around Dream. It's always justified, though. Dream is always poking and prodding at him, even though they're technically friends now. But George can give it as good as he gets, and Dream's words barely even bother him anymore, and even when they do it's still *fun*. "My drink is warm."

Dream hums, and makes another mark. "Which one did you grab?"

"Cran-Raspberry."

"Course it's warm. Sam just ran out and got them for me," Dream answers, real casual.

George blinks once. Twice. Then, "He *what*?"

Dream is so calm. Too fucking calm. Like, infuriatingly calm.

"When I found out you were coming over, I wanted to make sure I had something you liked. And I don't drink Cran-Raspberry, 'cause it's just *fine*, but I know you like it, so."

George is flattered. Of course he's fucking flattered. His cheeks feel too hot, and his ears burn, and he needs something else. Some other distraction. Quietly, he asks, "You don't like Cran-Raspberry?"

"I do not."

"Passionfruit is disgusting."

"We're all entitled to our opinions, Georgie. Even if yours is wrong."

George flips Dream off and, without even turning around or glancing back, Dream does the same. And it isn't done because they're enemies (because they're not anymore), and it's not just because they are always trying to be mean to each other (because they're not doing that, either). It's because they're Dream and George, and they know each other too fucking well.

It's not really something that needs to be explained. Or maybe it's just that George doesn't like trying to explain it. He thinks about it a lot though, wonders how locker room arguments turned into goodnight texts; into his fingerprint on Dream's phone.

Not that he needs a fingerprint.

Dream's password is 1999Patches, same as his Twitter account, same as his laptop. George tugs said laptop towards himself, enters the password, and puts on the fourth *Harry Potter movie*. Dream joins him an hour later, crawls into bed right beside him. He rests his cheek on George's shoulder, tired eyes trained on a young Robert Pattinson.

"What is this?" Dream asks, and he's so close that his hair tickles George's cheek every time he moves, and George can feel his every breath, no matter how small. But it's not, like, uncomfortable. It's not like they don't do this all the time, on the soccer field and in random parking lots after a late night meal. A bed isn't so different.

"*Goblet of Fire*," George answers, shifting the screen towards Dream.

"Is this on Hulu?"

"Disney Plus. All the Harry Potter movies are on Disney Plus."

Dream makes a noise in his throat, a surprised little hum. "It's *Harry Potter*?"

George snorts. “Obviously.”

“Huh. I’ve never seen *Harry Potter*. Heard a lot about it, though.”

There’s no way. No fucking way.

Slowly, George asks, “You’re messing with me, right?”

“Nope. I was more of a Percy Jackson kid, so—”

“Oh my god. We’re watching from the beginning, then.” George doesn’t leave any room for argument. He changes movies quickly, switches from *Goblet of Fire* to *Philosopher’s Stone*. Then he lays back down and stays like that for hours, staring at the screen, by Dream’s side, until *Prisoner of Azkaban* is starting and his eyelids are burning and Dream is half snoring, half babbling beside him.

He closes the laptop before the dementors come, and he has to reach over Dream to put it on the mini-fridge. George moves as slowly as he can, but Dream jolts awake anyway, hand grabbing George’s wrist. Bleary gold eyes peer over at him, flickering in recognition before Dream relaxes completely.

“You’re still here?” he asks, and his voice is just a little too much. It’s too surprised, too low, too *Dream*.

“Yeah,” George whispers back. And maybe he was gonna go home, but now Dream is looking at him with unguarded happiness, real soft and vulnerable, and George doesn’t want to be anywhere but beside him. “I’m spending the night.”

Dream’s eyes fall shut again, lips curling into a sleepy smile. “Cool,” he says, and immediately goes back to snoring in George’s ear.

Laying down beside Dream isn’t scary, or worrying, or even a little bit nerve-wracking. It’s not like entering Dream’s room. George doesn’t know bedrooms and yellow-green trinkets, but he knows Dream.

He knows Dream.

Besides, they’ve done this all before. Sure, it’s always been in a different place with a little more space between them, but it’s all the same in the end, and none of it really matters.

And when they wake up with tangled legs the next morning and Dream brings him breakfast in bed, that doesn’t really matter, either.

The day is finally here.

It’s not the tournament, but it’s finals, and this is their deciding game.

Manberg Soccer should be in. They’re undefeated, and they’ve been doing so well, and this is just another thing they need to do to get to the tournament. They’ve got this. George just needs to breathe, and think, and—

“Relax, George,” Karl says from beside him, but it’s not very reassuring because Karl’s knee is bouncing, his fingers are twitching, and he just won’t stop fucking *moving*.

“I’m relaxed,” George says, voice tight. He can feel his pulse in his mouth, moving through his

tongue and bouncing off his teeth. “I’m relaxed,” he repeats, like if he says it enough, it’ll somehow become true. George isn’t one for God, prefers cold hard facts over white wings and shining halos, but right now he’s praying to any deity that’ll listen.

“It’s the Syndicate. We beat them last year,” Karl says, and he’s right, of course he is. They *did* beat them last year, but that was before they had new players. Before they had Ranboo.

He’s a young kid – a freshman. He’s got these long legs, perfect for running and weaving and dodging. He’s been kicking a ball around ever since Syndicate arrived on the field, and it’s all cool, casual trickshots, like it’s all so *easy*.

He’s a freshman, and he’s on the Syndicate, and he’s one of the best players George has ever seen. George is *terrified*.

The Syndicate isn’t undefeated, but they’re good. Really fucking good. Good enough to beat Manberg, if they want, if they try hard enough.

And they try. They fucking *try*.

They get a goal in the first ten minutes, and Ranboo somehow slides two balls past George by the end of the first half. But Tubbo comes through, and Tommy pulls out all his best moves, and Karl runs like The Flash. He’s a navy blur on the field, all jukes and quick sidesteps as he steals the ball from between Syndicate cleats. He catches them up quickly, ties the score in just a few minutes. Then Boomer comes in and snags another goal, and they’re *ahead*. It’s nearing the end of the second half, and they’re ahead.

At the beginning of the game, the Syndicate had focused all their attention on George. They got their goals, they got ahead, but Manberg wrestled the ball away, started shooting goals of their own. The pressure left George and focused on Karl, Tommy, and Boomer instead, on them and their ability to score.

But now Manberg is leading, Ranboo’s looking at him all determined, and George feels like he’s going to turn inside out from how scared he is.

There are fifteen minutes left. He can last fifteen minutes.

Syndicate after Syndicate comes and takes their shot. George stops every single one. He dives, blocks, and catches. He keeps it locked down, even as Ranboo shoots with his stupidly talented feet, even as another player tries to fake him out. Even as the buzzer hits zero.

His heart is still in his throat and teeth and tongue, but it’s in the best way possible. He grabs the first person he sees and crushes them in a hug, and it’s only when he’s lifted slightly off his feet that he realizes it’s Tommy. It’s not Dream, because it’s never Dream anymore. As the season progressed, security has become more strict. Dream and George have jumped onto the field too many times, and apparently it’s a safety hazard.

But it’s okay, because George meets up with him after. He always meets with him after.

They’re leaned against Dream’s car, standing in the little parking garage outside the stadium. George is fresh out of the shower, dressed in sweats, a gray hoodie, and stolen neon socks.

“You were *insane*, George. I thought Ranboo had you,” Dream rambles. His voice has gone quick and blurred, like his brain is working faster than his mouth and he’s trying to catch up. He’s been like this ever since George finished his shower, recounting over each play in an impressive amount of detail. And it’s not, like, impressive for a football player. No – it’s just plain *impressive*.

"He almost did. So many times. That kid is too good. I barely scraped by."

Dream gives him a look. "Don't say that. Don't talk yourself down. You fucking *won*, George," he says. He jabs a finger in George's chest, repeats the last few words. "You fucking *won*." And then, because the conversation is getting a bit too serious for either of their likings, Dream switches it up. "You won. Dinner's your choice. Do you want Thai, or French, or—"

"Thai, obviously," he answers. Then, "I won."

Dream laughs. "I know. I just said that."

"I just—"

"You're happy," Dream finishes. "You should be. You should be proud. I'm proud of you."

George knows he's good. He knows he should be proud, and he is. But hearing Dream say it feels different than when he thinks it himself. It feels meaningful. Dream has seen him for all he is. He's seen him hateful, and envious, and spiteful, but he's proud of him anyway. Because Dream's a nice guy, and because he gives credit where credit is due, and because they're friends. Finally, fucking *finally*, they're friends.

The kiss happens quickly.

One second George is standing against the driver's side door, and the next he's leaning over, kissing Dream. He's still reeling from their win, and his heart is still beating kind of fast from the excitement of it all, but now it's beating fast for an entirely different reason. He's kissing Dream, his old enemy, his new friend, and Dream is kissing him back.

He pulls back and for a moment he's scared, because Dream's eyes are still closed, and he still looks a little shocked. But he opens his eyes, and he smiles; pretty, wide, and playful. There's a flush on his cheeks, drowning out his freckles entirely.

"You are such an idiot," Dream says with all the warmth in the world, then unlocks the car and takes his seat.

They don't talk about it. There's really nothing to talk about. It was a kiss, and it happened, and that's the end of it.

It happens again, though. Sometimes. Good luck pecks before games, stolen kisses during private practice. X's ending their texts.

It's not, like, a *thing*. Nothing is ever a *thing* between them, because their lives are too busy and complicated and *things* would only muddle it more. It's easier to leave it unsaid than to bring it up at all.

And it's not like it's important, y'know? It's not like it changes things. It's just a few kisses, barely anything at all. Certainly not something to flip out over. It's no different than splitting dishes, or sleeping in the same bed. Not really.

Manberg plays the tournament.

They *win* the tournament.

Boomer takes the winning shot, and his family is there to congratulate him afterward. Punz isn't

there, because he has school and all, but Boomer is on the phone with him all the same, screaming about how they won. How *he* won.

It feels good. It feels really fucking good.

They won the tournament, and Boomer's family is here, and Boomer's happy. They're all so fucking happy. Tubbo is maybe-sorta crying, and Tommy also looks like he's shed a few tears. He keeps rubbing at his eyes to hide them but he only makes it worse, only succeeds in making his eyes red and puffy. George takes a photo to use as blackmail later on, then hugs him close.

"How many people are on for dinner tonight?" Coach Wilbur asks. He's standing on top of the bench, looming over the still-cheering team. Every single player on Manberg Soccer raises their hand and lets out a collective scream. Wilbur winces and covers his ears, but that proud smile stays on his face. George doesn't know if it'll ever leave.

"Plus ones? How many plus ones?" Wilbur asks next, and the team goes significantly quieter.

Karl raises his hand for Sapnap, then says, "George needs one."

George shakes his head, letting go of Tommy. "No, I don't."

"What?" Karl's face scrunches up. Knitted brows, wrinkled nose. The textbook example of confusion. "What about Dream?"

"*What* about Dream?"

"George, are you— Are you serious?" Karl asks, and it doesn't look like he's messing around. He looks genuinely confused, and lost, and maybe even a little bit hurt.

George doesn't understand it. He doesn't understand *any* of it. He doesn't understand why Karl thought Dream would be his plus one, or why Boomer is looking at him funny, or why Tommy is whispering loudly to Tubbo about a breakup.

They didn't break up. Dream isn't his boyfriend. Dream isn't his anything.

They're friends. That's it. There's nothing more to it.

They hang out, and they text each other goodnight, and sometimes they kiss, but they're not dating.

They're not dating, yet Sapnap still glowers at him from across the table, like George just stole his damn puppy. George assumes it's because he's mad that Dream isn't here to celebrate with him, but he's got to learn that sometimes, Dream just isn't gonna be here. George and Dream have been attached at the hip for the last few weeks, but that doesn't make them a pair.

George is still his own person. He's his own person as he orders his drink (a sparkling water), and as he orders his entree (a French dish called *cassoulet*), and as he instinctively divides his food into two perfect halves.

"So, did Dream call you yet?" Sapnap asks, sipping his Dr Pepper.

George takes a bite of his food and calmly says, "He was the first one."

(He was always going to be the first one. Dream had a prior engagement that ran through the first half of the tournament. He could've driven down for the second period, but it would've been a waste of gas and time, and they both agreed that it'd just be easier to call after. It's not a big deal.

Sometimes when George says that, he actually means the opposite, but Dream's absence *really* wasn't a big deal.)

"Hm," Sapnap says, raising his brows.

He knows Sapnap is playing at something, knows that he's still feeling a bit raw about Dream's absence. But he indulges him anyway, asks him, "What?"

"Oh, nothing," Sapnap waves a hand with practiced indifference, "I just thought he'd be here with us. As your plus one."

George opens his mouth to speak, to snap out some passive-aggressive statement of his own, but a buzz in his pocket stops him cold. He used to turn his phone off for game days, didn't even want to risk getting distracted, but lately he's been keeping it on Do Not Disturb. Because—just fucking because, okay?

It's not like there's a real risk to it, because Dream's the only person that can break through the DND and he knows when he's not supposed to text or call, so it's not even an issue. In fact, Dream has *never* texted him during designated soccer time. Except for now, apparently.

George forgets all about Sapnap as he unlocks his phone, reading the text.

dream: Can I have the rest of your pad kee mao?

A second wave of messages rush in, one after the other.

dream: Please say yes I'm literally outside your door.

dream: Do you still keep the spare key in the flower pot?

dream: Update: I have the key in hand.

dream: Turning the handle now.

go for it, George texts back, and there's something wrong about it all. There's a sinking in his gut, and a lump in his throat, and the distinct feeling that someone is missing. He knows who. Two hours too late, he finally knows who. He knows that Dream should be here, by his side at this fancy restaurant, eyeing the most expensive things on the menu. Not at George's apartment, eating day old Thai.

But dinner has already started, and George can't invite him now. So he does what he can. He tells Dream to *enjoy my sloppy seconds*, rereads yesterday's *Goodnight xx* message, and turns his phone off for the remainder of the evening.

It passes fast; it passes slow. George feels trapped in the moment yet so, so out of touch. Some of the team goes out after dinner, Karl and Sapnap included, so George asks Wilbur to give him a ride home. George mopes the entire time, and already plans out how he's going to mope in his bed. Manberg won the tournament and it should be a Drake kind of night, at the very least, but he knows he'll put on his sad Post Malone playlist the second he's through the front door. He may have won the tournament, but he fumbled the ball. So, so fucking bad.

Wilbur looks kinda worried while he drives, and even asks George if he's alright when they arrive at the apartment. George looks at him, fully prepared to spit out some shit excuse about post-game depression, but then he sees the car parked in the visitor section of the parking lot, and he just can't get out fast enough. He's smiling now, so hard it *hurts*, and Wilbur is looking significantly less

worried as he shifts the car out of park and drives away.

George takes the stairs two at a time, and he's sure he's moving faster than he ever did at the game. When he opens the unlocked door, the TV is playing some dumb reality show, blond hair is sticking up over the couch cushions, and George finally feels the win. He feels the excitement, the pride, and the victory. But he also feels the soreness in his thighs. The ache in his heels.

George kicks off his shoes and collapses on the couch.

"Hey," Dream greets, voice sounding too soft for someone who just broke into an apartment. He nudges George's knee with his own in greeting, but he lets it stop there. Knee to knee, calf to calf.

"Hey," George says back, and the word feels too fragile in his mouth. Winning the tournament, hugging Tommy, hearing Wilbur's sappy speech at dinner – it's made him soft.

(Coming home to Dream may have made him soft, too. Just a tiny bit. Fucking minuscule.)

Dream smiles, shifting how he's sitting. He spreads out over the couch, sets his head on George's lap. "You won the championship."

"You congratulated me already." *Congratulated* may be a reach. It was more of screaming in his ear, rambled words given in the heat of the moment. It felt good, of course. It's *Dream*, and just about anything Dream feels good.

(There's a story in there, somewhere. Bennet sisters and awkward suitors and Keira Knightley period pieces. *You have bewitched me body and soul*, or some shit like that.)

"Doesn't mean I can't do it again," Dream says, but he doesn't push. He gets it, more so than most. He's a captain, too, and he understands the exhaustion that sets in after intense games. George has been training and coaching for months, all in preparation for the tournament. And now he's played the tournament, and he's won, and he needs a break.

Reality TV with Dream is a good break.

They burn through one episode of *Keeping Up With the Kardashians* and are starting on another when George finally asks. It's not a super pressing question, and it's not something he's ever thought about before tonight, but George asks it anyway because he wants to know Dream's answer.

"Why aren't we dating?"

Dream stiffens, but he doesn't get up. He doesn't pull away. "Do you want to be?" he asks. He doesn't sound hesitant or scared, but George knows him well enough to know when he's faking, and right now, he's half-deflated footballs and press-conference apologies.

"I mean," George starts, and Dream sits up beside him, shoulder to hip to thigh, pressed close. Always so fucking close.

"What?" Dream prompts, and now he's got that nervous look on his face, the one he gets before football games. George normally teases him about it, normally pokes and prods and jabs until Dream is out of his own head and back to the present moment. George has only ever seen the expression because of a game, or before a particularly hard test. Not because of anything else, or another person, and especially not because of him.

George, Dream, their interactions – it's all easy. They juggle so much shit every day and their time

together is like a distraction, almost. A little pause, a break so that they can catch their breath. It's not supposed to be hard, or stressful, or even a little bit nerve-wracking.

George *could* tease Dream about his nerves. He could talk about it until the expression fades and they return to that place of teases and taunts, where they're both more comfortable and far better suited. That place is good, and comfortable, and safe.

Or he could go further, aim higher. Nothing would really change. It'd just be a different name, a new title to call one another. They'd still be themselves, have the same dynamic. They'd be the same, the exact fucking same.

There's no risk to his words. There's not even a hint of danger.

"We're practically there already, aren't we?" It comes out knowing and confident. It's not even a question, not really.

Dream smiles. Soft, small. Relieved, but not surprised. "Yeah, we kind of are," he says, and reaches for George's hand. Their fingers lace together, small in large; goalie in quarterback; captain in captain, and that's all there really is to it. There is no intense kiss or heartfelt confession. Their lives are already so complicated. This doesn't have to be.

When they walk into practice on Sunday holding hands, George prepares himself for a reaction.

He expects a few confused looks, or maybe some awkward congratulations, but nothing comes. They only get one mean look from Tommy, who glares at them before angrily giving Tubbo a wad of folded bills.

"You couldn't have just stayed broken up?" Tommy asks as he passes, still acting all faux-mean.

Dream scrunches his forehead. "Broken up? What are you—"

"He's just bitter he lost the bet," Tubbo explains, waving him off.

George sets his bag down on the bench. "What bet?"

"We were betting on if you two were done for good. He said you were, but I had faith in you, Gogy," Tubbo says, clapping a hand down on George's shoulder before following Tommy out the locker room.

"We weren't even dat—"

"Don't lie to us, George!" Sapnap shouts, his head stuck in his locker.

Dream releases his hand. "No, Sap, we really weren't—"

"Yeah, yeah. Whatever. We're all very happy for you two," Karl says, joining Sapnap in the corner. And George is still lost, so fucking lost, because there's no way the teams figured it all out before them. It's just not possible.

(Coming to practice; ditching parties; sharing meals – together, together, together.)

(Looking back at it now, it's entirely possible the teams figured it out. It's entirely possible that they've seen this coming all along.)

George stays gawking over it all, even as Dream recovers, even as Dream takes him by the shirt

and pulls him close.

“I mean, they’re not wrong,” he says, and George stares at him in betrayal. Dream grins, wide and cocky, every bit the football playing asshole George believed him to be not so long ago, the one he still believes Dream to be now. “We were *practically there already*, weren’t we?”

Karl perks up from the corner of the room. George’s face goes hot all over.

“Oh, shut up,” he hisses out. It’s supposed to be mean, like bone-shattering tackles and red-card fouls and tripping cleats, but it comes out more like Thai dinners and setting suns and borrowed socks.

“What?” Dream asks, innocent. “I’m being romantic.”

“You’re being an idiot.”

Dream grins, big and dumb and smug, goodnight texts and pre-game kisses. “You love it.”

He looks at Dream, at messy blond hair and gold eyes and football confidence.

Yeah, he kind of does love it.

End Notes

kudos and comments are always appreciated!

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